



FALLING UPHILL

one man's quest for happiness
around the world
on a bicycle

Scott Stoll

Scott Stoll's cycling journey around the world raises countless questions about life in our time and answers quite a few of them. He is at once charming, innocent, fearless, and wise in his search for the world and himself. What does he find? Joy, tranquility, no end of personal challenges, and a whole lot more.

— Larry Habegger, Executive Editor, Travelers' Tales Books



If you could do anything, what would you do?

In one week, Scott Stoll lost his job, his best friend, his girlfriend and his confidence. Disillusioned with society, full of angst, a lost and wandering soul with nothing left to lose, Stoll asked himself a question: "If I only have one life, one chance, if I could do anything, what would I do?"

His answer resulted in a 4 year and 25,742 mile odyssey around the world by bicycle, seeking answers to the great mysteries of life, vowing to find happiness or die trying. The quest wasn't easy. He was imprisoned, held hostage, mugged, run over, suspected of terrorism, accused of espionage, trampled, diseased, heartbroken—he nearly died a dozen times. But more importantly, he also discovered the wonders of the world, kindness among strangers, the meaning of life, peace, love and—Yes!—happiness, in the most unlikely places.

Re-live and re-imagine a journey around the world on a bicycle as a man stumbles through moments of pure survival and moments of pure enlightenment.

Stoll has some harrowing and heart-warming tales to tell.

— San Diego Union Tribune

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Acclaim for “Falling Uphill”

[Stoll] did something most of us would not do: He decided to ride his bicycle around the world. His impulse isn't as strange as it might sound. Humans have always sought answers to life's perplexing questions by undertaking long and arduous journeys.

~ *San Francisco Chronicle*

It was an exhausting yet exhilarating trip filled with both human kindness and treachery, with nature's beauty, challenge and danger.

~ *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Scott Stoll lives a life the rest of us only dream of. With a keen eye and an open heart, he expresses the joys and aggravations of traveling the world on two wheels.

~ *Michael Berry, Bay Area book critic*

See! There's something else for us out there, we just have to dream a little bit. ~ WGN

The book is fascinating to read. ~ Showcase Minnesota

A bad day turned into an incredible adventure. ~ KION News

A book that makes me itch to get on the road again.... What surprised me was the style; not just another travelogue from A to B, but a whole philosophy of life and cycling. The best read since I read “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” over 10 years ago! ~ Andy G.

Scott's accomplishments and struggles reveal the beautiful and ugly sides of human nature, and his story gives us hope that we can all follow our dreams, no matter how foolish or impossible they seem. ~ Kate M.

A masterpiece on humanity. Thanks for not quitting so we can read about it and at the same time enrich our own lives. ~ Richard and Ingrid A.

It should be a primer for every child and on every home bookcase as ready relief for all adults. ~ Charles L.

If I had more money I would buy books for every library. The world needs people like Scott to show us what is possible, if you try. ~ Tony G.

I recognize the struggles you described, not so much because I traveled as far or as rough as you, but the struggle a lot of us have to be more appreciative of our lot in life, and to see the world with new eyes every day. ~ Chris D.

Through the author's words and experiences, I've had many self-realizations—See! He did make a difference. ~ Gerald H.

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**My start and finish:
The Golden Gate Bridge,
San Francisco, California,
United States of America.**



Preface: Why read this book?

During my long years of meditative cycling, despite my near-death experiences, moments of agony, months of chronic pain, illness, injury and overexposure, I realized my journey was many times more joyful than painful; however, ironically, I discovered it was the misadventures that forged my character and revealed my truer self, like suffering from heat exhaustion and realizing everything I owned was worth one glass of water, and if I had one wish before I died it would be to say goodbye to the ones I loved, and like standing on mountain tops in foreign cultures, realizing my entire knowledge base (belief system) didn't work anymore, and that it was possible, if not desirable, to survive with a totally different concept of reality.

As the Earth spun under my wheels, the miles began to burn the self-pity out of my mind and body. I slowly realized that I'd trained myself to be comfortably numb—or should I say?—that my culture conditioned me to be numb, feel helpless and wallow in my suffering; conversely, my culture also demanded force and encouraged the attitude that you're either running with the wolves—taking what you want before someone else does, thinking you're smarter, faster and better—or you're hiding among the sheep—playing follow the leader, hoping to be sent to pasture rather than slaughter.

My travels sparked new ideas: conceivably life can be a cooperative endeavor rather than competitive. Perhaps our cultural concepts like, “Life is a bitch and then you die,” are illusions; and, stumbling and suffering through mistakes one-by-one to learn life’s lessons and grow is only half the formula, or less than half? What if the spiritual cliché, “Enjoy the moment,” is the other half? Furthermore, what if there is no such thing as *making* a mistake as much as *making* an accidental discovery? And what if fear is *not* something to be afraid of, but a friend protecting and guiding us? Perhaps life isn’t a matter of pleasure versus pain, but appreciating the whole palette of emotions, finding the middle path, artistically dancing on the edge of the unknown and discovering new mysteries.

Much later than I want to admit, after I burned through several cycling companions (many people would join my journey for sections), I began to experience the beauty of the world and its people, especially the kindness of strangers, who would often give me their last morsel of food, or run barefoot through the jungles just to say hello. Somewhere in India, I stopped looking for *the answer*—as if there was one big answer that would solve all my problems—and learned to cherish the never-ending mysteries of life and self as they unfolded.

One mystery was that everywhere I went, sometimes dozens of times per day, people asked me the same questions. Most had never read a newspaper or watched television; some had never seen a foreigner, heard of America, or even knew in which country they lived. It was a fascinating mystery. How could all these people (regardless of age, race, gender, culture or any other factor) be asking the same questions in the same order? Then serendipity smiled and I realized that it was a key to human nature. People every-

where are fundamentally the same: we all have fears and doubts; and we all have hopes and dreams. The questions people asked me were evidence that we are all on a similar journey: traveling a path from struggle and survival, learning to befriend our fears, through a quest for meaning and happiness, and ultimately seeking peace and enlightenment.

This book is a collection of short stories written so that the reader may re-live and re-imagine the various “good” and “bad” experiences of cycling around the world. The questions (chapters) flow in a similar order that the citizens of the world asked me everyday, serving as metaphorical map for the spiritual path that we all travel.

Part I: Survival begins with stories that illustrate the most common questions asked throughout my journey, perhaps because survival is our most common need, like the seemingly mundane: “What do you eat?” a question that implies the majority of the world’s inhabitants haven’t met their basic needs, or haven’t overcome their fear of survival despite their abundance. Indeed my quest for the meaning of life was most often usurped by a quest to simply survive; and, ironically, I learned that sometimes the meaning of life is a cool glass of water in a hot desert.

Part II: Questing continues with stories asked by people that are gaining confidence they will survive and beginning to question life, thinking about breaking out of their self-imposed prisons and living their dreams; for example: “How did you get so lucky?” which implies that the majority of the world’s citizens not only regard themselves as victims of misfortune, but also victims of fortune; in other words, this illustrates how people feel helpless, and wonder what is the meaning of their life, or—maybe more accurately—they are wondering how to create the meaning of

their lives. Indeed my journey primarily consisted of questioning everything—mostly myself.

And *Part III: Oneness* concludes with less common, yet spiritually profound questions, like: “Are you happy?” which implies happiness is a relatively rare commodity everyone is seeking; and, I suspect people wanted verification that if they followed their dreams, they could also find happiness. This section also deals with the other nebulous concepts like love, peace and enlightenment that are perhaps our true rewards for a life well lived. Ironically, my own quest for oneness was fueled by its counterpart—a feeling of fleeing *noneness* or *aloneness* or *nothingness*—a feeling that I’ve discovered we all share to some degree.

The first two chapters, the *why* and the *how*, are not the most common questions, though I think they’re the most relevant questions. They belong in the section about questing, or what you might call emotional survival, but they serve as a nice introduction. You may read the book in any order, including chronologically by following the chapter key on the map; however I recommend browsing the questions that interest you first. While you read, I also encourage you to imagine that you are about to embark on your own impossible quest and that you are asking the questions to prepare yourself.

I offer several lessons that I learned upfront to the reader as a caveat: The beliefs of every culture and every person within that culture are different, so please imagine cycling fifty moons in my moccasins as I sample the world. I also highlight my most embarrassing, dangerous and enlightening moments as an illustration of the path from fear to hope—I’m still surprised I survived my immaturity and ignorance—but a perfect journey would have been perfectly boring. Finally, this book is full of my observa-

tions and interpretations and misinterpretations; I'm not an authority, and even if I were, please judge me only by what I can exemplify, not theorize—I don't think anyone wants theories as much as they want experiences; therefore, this book is meant primarily for your enjoyment. That being said, I do hope as you combine your life experiences with mine, you will make some delightful discoveries. Though, frankly, if you're seeking a magical solution to life, I suggest you drop all your books, get on a bicycle and go find it.



Author's note: When I say "bicycle" I often mean the literal and metaphorical vehicle of the spiritual journey.



4 Can you help me?

As I squat behind a rock, I admire the scenery. The sun pierces the thin atmosphere, bursting through brilliant white clouds and shattering into sparkles on the rocks. Shadows pan across the ground and up the mountains like disco lights. It looks as if I've entered a floorshow, "And here we have the deluxe, super-size Himalayan Model."

The prevailing winds push streams of rose, orange and yellow sand up and over the mountains. I wish it were so easy for me. Eight other bicyclists and I are riding on a gravel road up the World's Longest Hill. We joined forces in Kathmandu to buy the visas, permits, truck, driver and guide that the Chinese require for travel down the Friendship Highway in the "liberated" and "autonomous region" of Tibet.

After my potty break, I coast alongside the New Zealander,

Edwin. Although Edwin is the strongest rider in the group, he always waits for the weakest member, in this case, me, as I'm sick. My intestines feel as if I swallowed a boa constrictor, and my back end makes noises like a squeeze bottle. During my absence, a Tibetan shepherd has found Edwin. Nearby, the shepherd's large flock of sheep graze the small plants hiding among the rocks of the high-altitude desert.

Edwin says, "I'm teaching this guy that pens don't grow on trees."

The Tibetan turns to me, holding out his hand, "Hello. Pen?" A variation of the ever-popular question: "Can you help me?" Usually meaning: "Can you give me some money?" Which has devolved into: "Give money?!" Or: "Gimmemoney?!" Or, simply: "Give!"

According to the rumor, which is how these cultural infections spread, somewhere in Africa tourists began giving children pens, which the children were required to have in order to attend school. This tradition of giving away pens soon spread through Africa, sailed across the Indian Ocean, sped over the plains of India, through the jungles of Nepal, up the switchbacks of the Himalayas and swept into Tibet like the People's Liberation Army of China.

Long before it reached Tibet, this tradition, initially a humanitarian gesture, began teaching millions of people to panhandle. I remember riding through the Great Thar Desert in Rajasthan, India, where an adolescent spied my foreign-white skin glinting in the sun. He ran a kilometer barefoot through the thorny desert to the road, and then padded alongside me for another kilometer as I struggled against a hill and wind. "Hellomoneyschoolpen," he said in increasing decibels. He was a muscular lad wearing col-

orful clothes and large, dangling, gold earrings. Clearly he wasn't in desperate straits, and pens were never required for school enrollment in India. He ran with one hand on my panniers as if to threaten to overturn or drag me to a halt. When I escaped his grasp as the hill declined, he hurled insults and rocks after me. He was like the dirty, mangy, wild monkeys of India that people have cajoled out of the jungles with sweets. When the monkeys don't get what they want—what they feel the world owes them—they sneak into your room, set banana peel booby traps, steal a kilogram of peanut brittle, then sit on your bicycle, snarling and threatening to give you a thrashing.

Give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and feed him for life—this ancient Chinese proverb is both my philosophy and Edwin's, and soon to be the Tibetan Shepherd's.

The Tibetan is approximately our age, in his early thirties, though wizened by the sun and tooth decay. Still he's a handsome fellow with a broad face, strong cheekbones and golden skin. He has long hair, braided with colored string and wrapped around his head framing his face—the traditional style for men and women. “Hello. Pen?” he parrots.

“Hello. Sheep?” says Edwin.

“Hello. Coca-Cola?” I say, thinking he'll know this word and realize his absurd demand.

The shepherd points to Edwin's pen and then to himself.

Edwin points to a sheep and then himself. “You want a pen. I want a sheep. We all want something, but you have to work for it, mate.” Although neither Edwin nor the shepherd speak the same language, Edwin's voice is soothing and fills the gaps. “Baa. Baa,” he bleats to clarify his intent.

The shepherd looks confused, so I point from the sheep to

Edwin, then from the pen to the shepherd. Grasping the idea, he imitates me and we all nod in agreement. The shepherd walks to his flock and deftly scoops a lamb from her mother.

“What are you going to do with a lamb?” I ask.

“Don’t worry. He’ll never trade a lamb for a pen. I just want to teach him a lesson.”

“How much is a lamb worth?”

“I don’t know, but a lot more than a pen.”

What the Tibetan knows is that all the shepherds are selling their spring lambs. Lambs are a common source of food for the locals and, I believe, the desert can’t support all the newborns. And, of course, the shepherd knows the relative value of a pen in Tibet.

When the shepherd returns, Edwin tries to swap but the shepherd refuses and reopens the negotiations. Now he wants the pen and money. Edwin looks dismayed and jockeys his bicycle around the shepherd pretending to leave. The shepherd holds the lamb in front of Edwin, turning her from side to side. Then he shoves the lamb in my face and turns her from side to side. Her blue eyes sparkle, and her thick white fleece, adapted to the Himalayan winters, smells like dung. Again Edwin offers his pen for exchange.

This time it’s the shepherd’s turn to act his part in the bartering drama. He gets angry and pantomimes, “This is a tasty lamb. You’re stealing the food from my children’s mouths.” (In my opinion, over-population is the main problem in the world. If anything, people should give away condoms. “Hello. Condom?”) The shepherd backpedals toward his flock. He’s using the basic argument I’ve heard all over the world, “You have everything. I have nothing.”

Edwin holds up his pen and flicks the button several times, scribbles on his hand then tucks it into his shirt pocket by the clip. The Tibetan is entranced and, suddenly, he agrees to the exchange, sealing the bargain. So far, the bartering has followed the usual custom and Edwin has to follow through, or risk insulting and angering the shepherd.

The shepherd reaches for the pen, but Edwin, still intent on proving the value of a pen, indicates he wants the lamb first. After a couple bungled attempts, they swap simultaneously and I photograph the moment for posterity. The shepherd quickly stuffs the pen behind the silver buckle on his belt and Edwin is left cuddling the lamb. For a moment, Edwin's brown eyes are as big and bewildered as the lambs. "I never thought he'd go for it," he says, wincing at the loss of his pen.

"What are you going to do with her?"

"Don't worry," he brightens, "It's a bluff. He'll never let me ride away with his lamb."

"What if he does?"

"Then we'll have a mascot."

"We can eat it," I suggest.

We mount our bicycles, and as we pedal away, I think, "Lamb noodle soup. Lamb steamed dumplings. Fried lamb chops." Meanwhile Edwin is wondering what to name her, "The Dalai Lamb-a or Bo Peep the bicycling sheep." He struggles to hold the lamb in one arm and navigate his bicycle over the dirt road. The lamb bleats pathetically and 100 meters down the road, near the edge of the flock, she wins Edwin's heart and we stop.

The shepherd stares at us with a twinge of curiosity but shows little concern for his lamb. Perhaps, the shepherd has called Edwin's bluff.

“Dang,” Edwin pouts, “That was my last customized pen.”

“We can still eat it. Jabu and Dongteng [our Tibetan guide and driver] will know how to cook it.”

“Maybe we could just keep her in the truck,” he moves her from one arm to the other, away from me. Edwin is a vegetarian and I don’t think he can bear to be responsible for anyone eating his lamb.

“Someone has to eat it.”

Edwin puts the lamb down and begins herding her towards her mother. She bolts underneath the legs of the nearest sheep. Edwin chases the lamb. The lamb scrambles from sheep to sheep and Edwin scrambles after the lamb, zigzagging through the flock until, suddenly, he’s face to face with the shepherd. “Just give me my pen. You see—there’s your lamb.”

While Edwin was causing a stampede, the shepherd has gotten his sling out and loaded it with a rock. He swings it around several times and sends the stone soaring over his flock. Edwin doesn’t seem to notice. With a soothing voice, he keeps talking to the shepherd. The shepherd reloads and releases a second stone with a crack and it buzzes through the air, causing me to cringe, and shatters against a boulder. Undeterred, Edwin advances, “Just give me the pen.” He points to the hidden pen and then himself. “Hello. Pen?”

“They’ve both gone crazy,” I think, laying my bicycle down and preparing to rescue Edwin. The Shepherd sees me approach and grabs his dagger out of the ground and begins wagging it at Edwin, then me, then Edwin, while yelling, “Stay back or your friend gets it,” or so I imagine.

I freeze, but Edwin encroaches on the shepherd’s territory holding out his hand, “Hello. Pen? Give Pen!”

The shepherd is behaving like a madman now. He shouts, lunges and feints a stab towards Edwin's belly. Finally, looking genuinely frightened, Edwin holds his arms above his head. "All right, keep the pen," he says. "Keep the pen."

When Edwin retreats, I'm laughing so hard that my gut twists painfully. "Buddy! What were you thinking?"

"I just wanted my pen back," bemoans Edwin. "Just wait until everyone finds out that I—a New Zealander—traded a pen for a sheep."

By now our Australian friend Matt has arrived and we laugh. The competitive and mischievous Australians have given New Zealanders a notorious reputation with their sheep jokes.

"But you don't have either."

"That's the worst part." He closes his eyes and sighs, as if imagining the embarrassment of confessing to his Kiwi mates.

"Aw. You made a cute couple."



Some Tibetan women tilling the rocky fields invite me to share lunch.